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Mystery-driven institutionalism: the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises as a book of practices leading nowhere

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Abstract

This paper discusses how mystery was imprinted into the Jesuit *Spiritual Exercises*, supporting their diffusion across space and time. It shows that the book of the *Spiritual Exercises* is a practice in itself and fosters a practice or set of practices. The book is more than an object: it is an action, unleashed not by the specification of what actions it dictates but by the mystery the ‘book-as-practice’ carries. The paper contributes to the literature on practice-driven institutionalism, namely by showing how mystery furthers our understanding of the mutual constitution of practices and institutions. The *Spiritual Exercises* have been practiced for more than four centuries, even though their meaning is not stable and they are never fully understood. Therefore, our paper asks: how do the Jesuits understand what they have to do if the book does not prescribe everything? We argue that it is indeed this mystery that distinguishes religious practices, explaining their endurance across time and space and, henceforth, their institutionalisation. We show that the *Spiritual Exercises* are to be practiced and it is this practicing that allows them to diffuse and institutionalise a new understanding of how the individual relates to God. ‘God’s will’ is searched through the practicing, without ever being determined by the practice. It is by practicing the book that the mystery of ‘God’s will’ reveals itself. Moreover, ‘God’s will’ is never known or knowable. Instead, it is embodied and felt while practicing the book of the *Exercises*. Emotions thus reconcile, through mystery, the new logics and the practicing of it. Our paper contributes to practice-driven institutionalism by showing how mystery can drive institutionalisation processes.

Keywords: mystery, Jesuits, institutionalism, practice theory, institutional logics, religion

*“i trenini che facciamo alle nostre feste [...] so' i più belli di tutta Roma [...] perché non vanno da nessuna parte”**
(*The great beauty*, by Paolo Sorrentino, 2013)

Introduction

Institutionalism and practice theory have grown apart, with the former focused on contextual and broader explanations of phenomena and the latter zooming-in daily and mundane interactions. However, there have been calls for greater dialogue between institutional and practice driven approaches (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl, & Whittington, 2015; Smets, Aristidou & Whittington, 2017). Practice-driven institutionalism (PDI; Smets, Aristidou & Whittington, 2017) follows Schatzki's (2001, p. 2) definition of practices as ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding(s)’. These ‘shared practical understanding(s)’ (Schatzki's, 2001, p. 2) are akin to institutional logics and the meaning they provide to material practices (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012).

Practices are therefore a way of putting ‘logics in action’ (Lounsbury & Boxenbaum, 2013), of instantiating order and logics (McPherson & Sauder, 2013). As an example, Lounsbury and Crumley (2007) reflect on the pounding of a nail, which is ‘*devoid of deeper social meaning*’, unless seen as part of the set of practices that constitute ‘*professional carpentry*’ (p. 295). In yet another example, Friedland and Alford (1991, p. 249) reflect on how the practice of voting instantiates the logics of democracy. However, practices are not mere embodiments of logics: practices can also be the center of institutional logics’ change (see Jarzabkowski, 2004; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007).

Notwithstanding, little is known about how changes in practices can either drive changes in logics or reflect the adaptation of practices to changing logics. If practices are instantiations of logics, we need to better understand how is it that practice variation can imply a logic variation, namely across different spatial and temporal contexts (Boxenbaum, 2006; Czarniawska &

* “The congas we do at our parties [...] are the most beautiful of the whole of Rome [...] as they are leading nowhere” (our translation).

Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). We also need to better understand other elements inherent to these dynamics: on the one hand, practice variation might not always imply a logic variation; on the other hand, changes in practices might be part of a shift in a logic, most likely that we are still not aware of.

Extant literature has emphasized the plurality of logics and the combination of multiple logics, largely overlooking changes occurring in one specific institutional logic and how these are either reflected in or driven by material practices. In this paper we follow the logics of religion and the changes it went through in the 16th century. More specifically, we analyse how a material practice, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, both embodied and enacted changes in the logics of religion. In the Western Christian tradition, the logics of religion is mainly driven by the relationship between God and the faithful. More specifically, the logics of religion deals with the question: how does God speak to the faithful and how can the faithful have access to God's word/will? Within Catholicism, the religion on which our paper is focused, God reveals Himself through the Scriptures, Tradition and the hierarchical mediation of the Church as the main interpreter of Scriptures and Tradition and as the institution which legitimizes dogma. With modernity, the individual is put at the centre of the relationship with God. However, putting the individual at the centre is not the same as putting reason at the centre. On the contrary: it is through affects and embodied practices that the individual searches for God (Endean, 2001). It is against such backdrop that the *Spiritual Exercises* emerge as a practice for embodying and discerning the affects that result from a direct communication between the individual and God.

Our findings show that the Jesuit *Spiritual Exercises* changed the relevance of the hierarchical mediation of the Church (the logics of Catholicism) and blended it with a direct relationship between the individual and God (the logics of Protestantism). However, the *Spiritual Exercises* are not about the mere blending of multiple logics. Instead, the *Spiritual Exercises* are a material practice which does not embody 'God's will', which is mysterious, but guides the individual through a series of 'steps' ('places', in Certeau's (1973) words) that will allow the individual to eventually access 'God's will'.

Our findings are relevant for practice driven institutionalism because they show that the material practices do not need to produce or provide access to institutional logics so as to instantiate them. In the case of the *Spiritual Exercises*, it is the mysterious nature of the material practice that a) allows the diffusion of the institutional logic and b) underpins the logic of

religion. The *Spiritual Exercises* are particularly interesting because they are a book, a material object which is itself a practice. The material elements of the book allowed it to be printed and therefore materially diffused. However, the book is designed to “be practiced” (Quattrone, 2009) and in that sense the book is a practice itself and diffused even if not fully understood. Finding ‘God’s will’ is therefore about the mysterious engagement with a book-as-practice, in which the individual practices the search for ‘God’s will’ without ever being fully certain that such will is ever found. That is: ‘God’s will’ is always mysterious and unachievable but it is precisely such mystery that underpins the constant search of what might never be found and sets the conditions for the logic of religion to have a multiple and fluid ontology (Mol, 1999), which, we argue, is what allows such a logic to diffuse and persist across space and time.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on practice driven institutionalism. Second, we discuss whether god can be represented. This will allow us to introduce the *Spiritual Exercises* and the different ways used in it so as to explore the relationship between an individual and god. Lastly, we discuss the implications of our findings for institutionalism and for practice driven institutionalism more specifically.

Literature review

Practice-driven institutionalism

Practice-driven institutionalism (PDI) is about the micro dynamics that might account for institutional stability and change. More specifically, PDI abridges a practice theory’s ‘large ontology’ (Seidl & Whittington, 2014) with institutionalism’s ‘top-down ontology’ (Smets, Aristidou & Whittington, 2017). In this paper we focus on how practices might shed light on the dynamics of institutional logics. To do so, we will centre our analysis on the institutional order of religion, allegedly one of the less studied within organization studies.

The look for the “microfoundations of institutions” (Powell & Colyvas, 2008) in institutional logics is not new. As an example, Glaser, Fast, Harmon, & Green Jr. (2016) have shown how institutional logics can drive individual action through a network of schemas; in yet another example, Zilber calls for research on ‘institutions as reified entities’ (2016, p. 139). This call is akin to Hallett & Ventresca’s (2006) ‘inhabited institutions’ and to a search for how ‘institutional logics work on the ground’ (Zilber, 2016, p. 139).

The look for the “microfoundations of institutions” (Powell & Colyvas, 2008) also informed a practice perspective on institutions (Jarzabkowski, Smets, Bednarek, Burke & Spee, 2013; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Within PDI, some studies have looked into the impact of institutions on practices (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007), whereas others have uncovered the

impact of practices on institutional logics (Smets, Morris & Greenwood, 2012). The turn to practice within institutionalism has emphasized ‘material practices’ (Friedland & Alford, 1991) and, more specifically, institutional logics have been defined as simultaneously material and ideal (Friedland & Alford, 1991). However, the material has been largely overlooked when compared to the ideal and symbolic, as “materiality has been interpreted primarily as practices and structures, and rarely as physical objects” (Jones, Boxenbaum & Callen, 2013, p. 51). Bringing objects into institutionalism opens important venues of research about how “institutions are created, maintained, and disrupted through the combination of humans, language, and material entities” (Monteiro and Nicolini 2014, p.74).

The material can further our understanding of how institutions and institutional logics are created, legitimised and maintained. However, material practices have been analysed as distinct from material objects, even though both are recognised as capable of inscribing norms of behaviour. Material practices have distinctive properties when compared with material objects. Even though this might explain their analytical distinction in extant literature, both material practices and material objects can be durable (Jones et al., 2013), immutable and mobile (Latour 1993). Moreover, objects, such as churches (Jones & Massa, 2013) or maps (Latour 1993) induce material practices. As a consequence of the analytical distinction between material practices and material objects, the possibility that an object can be seen as action in itself (Fabbri, 1998), thus being a practice rather than inducing a practice, has been largely overlooked. Instead, the emphasis has been put on the affordances of an object, raising questions around which practices does an object afford. Furthermore, materiality is also about instantiation, raising questions around which actions are available to individuals. Be it a practice or an object, something is material as long as it enacts action and generates consequences (Law and Singleton, 2005). Paradoxically, from this perspective, even the lack of materiality can be material: absences, lacks and silences are all material, not because they are defined, touchable and finite, but because they generate actions and effects (Giovannoni and Quattrone, 2018). Hence, the material status of an object can change with time, becoming immaterial in case it is not used.

Miller (2005) speaks about how the material is made even more relevant, the more immaterial it becomes. This is particularly true in religion: ‘a belief in the ultimate truth as a form of immateriality is still commonly expressed through material forms and practices’ (Miller, 2005, p. 7). Even so, the materiality of an object is not capable of revealing every possible practice unleashed by the object. Therefore, an object grounds the immaterial without grounding it. Objects are incapable of enclosing all the possible venues for action. Because of such

incapability, objects are ontologically mysterious insofar as they never reveal, neither the outcomes of their acting, nor the possibilities of action they enclose.

The ontologically mysterious nature of objects has been largely overlooked, we claim, because after the ‘sociomaterial’ turn (Orlikowski, 2007), the social and the material were approached as being ‘strongly entangled’ (Carlile, Nicolini, Langley & Tsoukas, 2013, p. 7). Instead of being entangled, we argue, the social and the material can be fused. Therefore, we ask: can a practice and an object coalesce? The answer to this question can be particularly enlightening in the context of the institutional order of religion.

The logics of religion

Two main issues drive the logics of religion. First, the question of imagining and seeing the divine: how can we represent, ‘see’ (with the eyes of imagination) or feel the presence of God? Second, the question of ‘listening’ to the divine: how can we interpret god? These two elements underpinning the logics of religion bring to the fore the ‘tension between the iconic/visual and the aniconic/aural representations of God’ (Wolfson, 1994, p. 4). What is the proper interpretation of God? How can we be sure about visions of God? How can we know what God says?

Our case is particularly useful to enlighten the dynamics of the institutional order of religion. The problematics of seeing and listening to god are present in the *Spiritual Exercises*, through, as an example, the use of imagery and the role of the director of the *Exercises*. However, the practice of the *Exercises* does not embody any image of god. Neither does it embody god’s will. On the contrary: the practice of the *Exercises* embodies mystery, that is, the impossibility of fully grasping god’s essence and truth, as this would reduce its complexity and omnipotence. We then ask: what is so mysterious about the *Spiritual Exercises* that allows them to be practiced even if not understood? This is, we argue, the key difference between ‘practice-driven institutionalism’ and ‘mystery-driven institutionalism’.

Practice-driven institutionalism (PDI) seems to rely on the assumption that practices are a force that determines action. The fact that ‘institutional and practice theorists share in the seminal work of Bourdieu (1977; 1990), Giddens (1980) and Foucault (1980)’ (Smets et al., 2017, p. 367) points to a common understanding of subjectivity. As Certeau, highlights, it relies on the subject’s ‘*docta ignorantia*’ (1984, p. 56): practices drive action even though the subject is not aware of such force. Such understanding locates the subject’s drive for action in external structural conditions. Even if practices are understood as situated, embedded and improvised, they are so according to ‘local, temporal and social norms’ and ‘can only be examined and

understood within a specific context: temporal, spatial, historical and – above all – relational’ (Smets et al., 2017, p. 370). This leaves aside the possibility of agency being transcendent. Such transcendence does not mean that agency results from yet another ‘structure’, located beyond ‘this world’. Instead, the possibility that agency is transcendent means that agency is an ontological characteristic of the acting individual. Such possibility would imply that agency is devoid of meaning, and that such absence of meaning is, as a fact, immanent in action: absence of meaning is what pervades action. Such immanence of meaning in action is made clear in our findings. The *Exercises*, as a practice, imply a constant search for ‘God’s will’, which is not ‘out there’ to be found, in a classic subject-object relationship. Instead, ‘God’s will’ unfolds as the individual practices the search for it. In that sense, God’s transcendental will is not yet another layer. Such understanding would place religion, namely Catholicism, closer to idealism than to God (Endean, 2001, p. 26).

A similar line of reasoning has already been developed regarding objects. As an example, Giovannoni and Quattrone (2018) have shown the materiality of absences and how gaps, incompleteness and absences can produce organizing effects. Such conclusion is in line with Knorr Cetina’s (2001) epistemic object concept, where the incompleteness scientific representations stimulates a recursive process of investigation (p. 176). Knorr Cetina’s (2001) “objectual practice” is also relevant for our discussion insofar as they transform themselves and the “entities formed by the relationship” (p. 185) between objects and practices. That is, whereas objects are characterized by incompleteness, practices are characterized by an “underlying relational dynamic” (Knorr Cetina, 2001, p. 184) and by the “regular branching off of strands of practice” (Knorr Cetina, 2001, p. 186). The relational dynamic dimension is Lacanian and highlights how the structures of wanting/desire allow the practice to transform itself together with the entities that surround the practice.

Even though such insights have been part of extant literature for some time (e.g. Quattrone, 2009), the notion of “objectual practice” (Knorr Cetina, 2001) has been overlooked by practice-driven institutionalists. The main reason for it, we claim, is that extant literature relies on the assumption that a) materiality is important to embody institutions, and b) practices embody preferences which even though located in time and space and therefore situated, are still the reflection of shared norms and values that stand beyond the individual instead of being transcendent.

This possibility might further our understanding of the logics of religion where the unknowability of God’s mystery makes the theorization of such embodiment problematic and in need of further exploration. The search for the ‘*will of God*’ which underpins the logics of

religion would then have to look for what is transcendent, instead of looking for internal schemata driving individual action or structures that are beyond the individual.

Methods

Notwithstanding the growing interest of historical methods in organisation studies (Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014; Suddaby, Foster, & Mills, 2014), and their alleged relevance to further studies informed by institutionalism, historical case studies are still the exception. Furthermore, the vast majority of the research that is underpinned by historical case studies does not go beyond the 19th century (Rowlinson et al., 2014; Kieser, 1987; Ruef & Harness, 2009).

Our study is longitudinal and extends throughout more than 400 years of history of the *Exercises*. This poses some methodological challenges. First, which sources to choose? Second, how to connect sources that are so dispersed in time? Third, how to analyse sources which were produced in different temporal contexts? The following paragraphs make visible our research design and our analytical strategy.

Research design

Our paper draws on historical primary and secondary sources that cover the period starting in 1522, when Ignatius of Loyola started writing the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Four hundred years later, in 1922, Pope Pius XI declared Ignatius of Loyola the ‘*Patron Saint of spiritual retreats*’, a distinction which recognised the role of the *Spiritual Exercises* in the institutionalisation of the ‘spiritual retreat’ in the Catholic Church. The *Spiritual Exercises*, as a retreat, are important to understand the shift in the logics of Catholic religion insofar as they materialise the possibility of God revealing His will to an individual, hence overcoming the almost exclusive role of the Church as a hierarchical mediator between God and the individual. This led us to implement a temporal bracketing strategy (see Langley, 1999), which divided the 400 years period into 3 main periods. The first period goes from 1522 till 1556 (when Ignatius of Loyola died); the second period goes from 1556 till 1773 (when the Jesuits were suppressed); the third period goes from 1814 (when the Jesuits were restored) till 1922 (when Ignatius of Loyola was declared ‘*Patron of spiritual retreats*’. This allowed us to uncover different ways of practicing the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Data sources

Our aim was to understand how the *Spiritual Exercises*, as ‘a book to be practiced’ (Quattrone, 2009), allowed the exercitant to find ‘God’s will’. Therefore, we started by collecting primary and secondary sources on the contents of the *Spiritual Exercises*. We consulted the translated version of the *Spiritual Exercises*, together with notes on how they were delivered and which we consulted in the Jesuit archives in the Vatican, the *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu* (ARSI). We complemented these notes with ethnographic notes one of the authors took while doing the *Spiritual Exercises*. We used the latter to trace which elements of the practice are still in use and how the book is performed.

Further to analyses of various secondary sources, like Hendrickson (2013), we chose the primary sources used in our analysis of the period that goes from 1556 to 1773. Between Ignatius of Loyola’s death (1556) and the worldwide suppression of the Jesuits by the Vatican (1773), the practice of the *Exercises* was the target of various controversies, opposing those who favoured its ascetic elements to those who saw in it a method underpinning the mysterious revelation of ‘God’s will’ (see, *inter alia*, Certeau, 1995, and Hendrickson, 2013, for a fuller discussion). This led us to consult spiritual treatises which were widely published in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. We chose the most impactful, using as a criterion those which were more widely translated and published (some well into the mid 20th century).

For the period that goes from the reestablishment of the Jesuits by the Vatican (1814) till the institutionalisation of Ignatius of Loyola as ‘*Patron of spiritual retreats*’ (1922), we consulted sources related to Father Jan Roothaan, that can be found in the *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu* (ARSI). Roothaan was the global leader of the Jesuits (known as Superior General) during the 19th century, being known as the ‘*General of the Exercises*’ for his efforts in the reestablishment of the practice to its original status.

Data analysis

In line with studies on institutionalism which took a historical angle (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Rao, Monin & Durand, 2003; Wright & Zammuto, 2013), we first made a detailed reading of the data. At this stage we were able to uncover the main drivers of the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*, namely the tensions between their ascetic and mystical nature. Second, we developed a narrative of the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*. We then pursued the materials to recover the network of practices clustered around the *Spiritual Exercises*, together with the network of ‘spiritual treatises’ and other books developed so as to diffuse the practice across time and space.

Our data analysis was iterative in nature (Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013) and informed by the hermeneutic tradition (Philips & Brown, 1993). The data was analysed vis-à-vis the historical, social and cultural context in which they were produced (Kipping, Wadhwani, & Bucheli, 2014). Our hermeneutic strategy was upheld by the fact that the authors are experts on the history of the Jesuits, and one of them has practised the *Spiritual Exercises* in their entirety (one month of retreat). For that reason, ethnographic notes were used so as to uncover how the practice is still practiced today.

Findings

The book as a practice: ‘paths leading nowhere’

One of the most remarkable, and often forgotten characteristics of the book of the *Spiritual Exercises* is its openness. The *Spiritual Exercises* provide the reader with a series of rules on how to meditate, on how to examine the conscience, on how to discern ‘God’s will’. All these elements that compose the *Spiritual Exercises* provide the reader with a series of ‘steps’ (Certeau, 1973) to follow so as to find ‘God’s will’. However, the *Exercises* never provide content regarding what is ‘God’s will’. Neither do the *Exercises* provide details on the full meaning of most of its meditations, suggesting instead how to meditate as opposed to what the meditation might lead to. Such openness underpinned the development of other spirituality books written by Jesuits to complete what Ignatius left unfinished. As an example, such spirituality books suggested passages of the Bible that complement the meditation on the birth of Christ. However, how the exercitant would reach ‘God’s will’ by meditating on the birth of Christ would always be left open. That is: ‘God’s will’ is not captured by the meditation on the birth of Christ (as an example of a meditation found in the *Exercises*). Instead, it is the practicing of the meditation that might reveal (or not) ‘God’s will’, even though such purpose is not even mentioned in this meditation.

A good example of such spiritual works that were written to support the *Exercises* is Luís de La Palma’s (1559-1641) ‘*Historia de la Sagrada Pasion*’, originally published in 1627. In it, Palma wrote that those who meditate using the *Exercises* ‘lack material content’ (Palma [1627]/1786, p. 1. Authors’ translation from the original Spanish). Hence Palma’s objective: to provide those who practiced the *Exercises* with ‘points on which they can occupy their thoughts with some gains’ (Palma, [1627]/1786, p. 1). The open character of the *Exercises* was Palma’s ([1627]/1786) main motivation to write the ‘*Historia de la Sagrada Pasion*’, not the least because those reading any book always look for something that ‘moves their will, which

they will not find in this Book’ (in the Spanish original Palma refers to the *Exercises* as ‘Libro’ (Book); see Palma, [1627]/1786, p. 4). Hence the *Exercises* ‘being known only by a very few, and understood by even less people’ (Palma, [1627]/1786, p. 4).

Palma’s work (1786) was not unique. Other Jesuit authors became famous for the spiritual books they wrote to complete what Ignatius had left open in the *Exercises*. Another good example is Louis Lallemant (1578-1635), whose book ‘*Doctrine Spirituelle*’ (1694) would, just as Palma’s, impact generations of Jesuits up until the late 19th, early 20th centuries. Lallemant’s ‘*Doctrine Spirituelle*’ is in fact a collection of presentations he gave to Jesuits completing their final stage of formation, known as *Tertiarity*. One of the ‘*Doctrine Spirituelle*’s’ sections is based on Jean-Joseph Surin’s (1600-1665) notes, a Jesuit who was the ‘main character’ of Michel de Certeau’s book *The Possession at Loudun* (2000). Lallemant and Surin are part of the ‘*école française*’ of mysticism (Bartók, 2017), which Certeau analysed as part of his work on the mystiques (see Certeau, 1995, 2000, 2015). Lallemant’s work is particularly relevant insofar as it brings to light the controversies, within the Jesuits, around the mystical vis-à-vis ascetical character of the *Spiritual Exercises* (Certeau, 1995). Such controversies were never settled. As late as the early 20th century, Lallemant’s work, and the discussion it informed, were still relevant. And so was the work of Alfonso Rodríguez (1538-1616), a major figure in the ascetical interpretation of the *Exercises*, whose book ‘*Ejercicio de perfección y virtudes cristianas*’ was still being translated and published in the mid 20th century.

In the context of our paper, the controversies around the correct interpretation of the *Exercises* are testament to the open nature of the book. By leaving the practice the book of the *Exercises* entails open, Ignatius allowed the book and the practice to be appropriated differently. Without, however, limiting the development throughout the centuries of a particular form of spirituality within Catholic tradition, known as ‘Ignatian spirituality’. In that sense, the idea of ‘points’ to guide the meditation was paramount for the institutionalisation of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Throughout the centuries, what the book does not say was filled in with points to guide the meditations. Such tradition still informs the practice today.

Among the elements of the *Spiritual Exercises* which was left open is what Ignatius described as indifference towards ‘God’s will’: ‘*it is necessary to make ourselves **indifferent to all created things**, in regard to everything which is left to our free will and is not forbidden. Consequently, on our own part we ought not to seek health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long life rather than a short one, and so on in all other matters. Rather, we ought to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the*

end for which we are created.' (SE, §23. Emphasis added). Indifference stands at the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*, literally as the foundation of the entire experience of search for 'God's will'. Ignatian indifference underpins the search for 'God's will' insofar as it is a measure (Rahner, 1971) of the objectivity needed so as to take decisions. In this sense, indifference is about the detachment of 'all created things' (SE, §23). However, such detachment is neither of a stoic kind, nor related to any ascetic drive (Endean, 2001). Instead, indifference is about becoming indifferent (Rahner, 1971). Therefore, the search for 'God's will' for the individual, which cannot be clearly expressed, implies a profound relationship with 'all created things' (SE, §23): the individual neither desires health, nor sickness; neither wealth, nor poverty; neither honour, nor dishonour; neither a long life, nor a short one. All things created are good, and mediums towards God. Hence, the foundation of the *Spiritual Exercises* rests on the relational engagement with everything and nothing at the same time. The individual has no preference, except 'God's will', which allows them to prefer anything deemed useful for the service of the ultimate end. Anything that is worldly can then be transcended through indifference (Endean, 2001). Because of such characteristic, Jesuit indifference allows the individual to accommodate any thought, practice or object. As Endean (2001) puts it, '*all possession of God must allow God to be greater than any possession*' (p. 88).

Notwithstanding the apparent easiness with which one can apprehend the type of normativity indifference generates, what strikes as particularly interesting for us is the experience and the mode of relation to the self that indifference implies. Moreover, as the *Spiritual Exercises* are a retreat to be practiced under the guidance of a Master/Director, we are particularly interested in how is it that the master moves the individual towards indifference without imposing content and without any pre-defined rationalities concerning 'God's will' for that individual.

The book as a stage for performance

Looking at the role of the Master/Director of the *Spiritual Exercises* allows us to gain a fuller understanding of how the individual can search for the mystery of 'God's will' without such will ever being determined.

The role of the master of the *Exercises* was addressed in several Directories published in the 16th century and in several spiritual treatises from the following centuries. As an example, Lallemand's spiritual manual starts by providing points to meditate on the 'Principle and foundation'. Lallemand expands the idea of indifference into several points (which those who posthumously published Lallemand's reflections on the *Exercises* organized as 'principles') for

meditation. Indifference is associated with the ‘void’: ‘*There is a void in our heart which all creatures united would be unable to fill. God alone can fill it.*’ (Lallemant, [1694]/1855, p. 37, Principle 1, §1); ‘*Creatures desire to take the place of our last end, and we ourselves more than all, we desire to be our own last end.*’ (Lallemant, [1694]/1855, p. 38, Principle 1, §2), ‘*To seek God is to wish for nothing and to desire nothing but that which He wills, and which He ordains by His providence*’ (Lallemant, [1694]/1855, p. 43, Principle 2, §1).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, other works were published on how to meditate using the *Exercises*. Examples of which are Roothaan’s, who also reflected on the Ignatian principle of indifference as ‘*tantum quantum*’: a ‘*Règle de conduit: rien de plus, rien de moins*’ (See ‘*Puncta Meditationum et Instructionum Spiritualium*’, pp. 433-542). Yet another example, we found, in the Jesuit archives, are the points for meditation written by Jean Grou and Mazzolari (see *ARSI, Exercitia*, 4; *ARSI, Exercitia*, 5; and *ARSI, Exercitia*, 6) in the early 20th century. The development of ‘points for meditation’ around the *Exercises*’ initial meditation on indifference entails a series of practices (meditations), which were complemented with further written elaborations by future generations of Jesuits on how the exercitant could relate to the book.

In this sense, the *Exercises*’ meditations open ‘*paths leading nowhere*’ (Certeau, 1995, p. 62). The fact that the practice ‘leads nowhere’ is concomitant with the ‘*literarily impoverished*’ nature of the *Exercises*: what is absent in the text, the voids which populate it, are fundamental to open the mysterious nature of ‘God’s will’. As Barthes (1976) puts it, referring precisely to the Jesuit *Exercises*, ‘language is merely the docile and *insignificant* [italics in the original] instrument for the serious things that occur in the spirit’ (p. 39). The voids that populate the *Exercises* underpin the development of multiple texts (Barthes, 1976) entailing a polyvocal construction of ‘God’s will’: the director of the *Exercises* (as responsible for presenting the meditation points to the exercitant), the exercitant and God, all concur to the mysterious construction, through an ‘acted text’ (Barthes, 1976, p. 42), of ‘God’s will’. Hence the nature of the *Exercises* as a practice, whose aim ‘does not consist in generating new lights for intelligibility, but in extinguishing it’ (Certeau, 1995, p. 72).

The points, or topics, generated to complete what the *Exercises* left incomplete were ordered into a sequence (a ‘*discursus*’; Certeau, 1995, p. 120), a process, that allowed the exercitant to order the manner of speaking with God, without ever determining the contents of such mysterious conversation. The *Exercises* are therefore not a set of given ideals to be practiced: it is the exercises themselves which are to be practiced and therefore become practices themselves. Their text, and the texts which complement it, bring to the fore the circumstances

in which a conversation with God occurs; they do not establish what is spoken. In this sense, how the practice is practiced (practicing) is more relevant than the representation of the practice. Such understanding of the *Exercises* as a practice is made visible on how, throughout the centuries, what was institutionalised was the practicing of the *Exercises*, through constant adaptations of the meditations, and not ‘*what was said*’ in the conversation the exercitant had with God.

Body and emotions

By establishing an itinerary, the *Exercises* become an opportunity for performing a search. However, performing such a search is not only the result of the ‘steps’ (Certeau, 1973) that constitute the practice, but also of the conditions under which the practice is ‘to be practiced’. The *Exercises* call for a disposition: ‘*retreat in a place shut away, solitary, and above all unaccustomed, lighting conditions (adapted to the subject of the meditation), dispositions of the room where the exercitant is to stay, positions (kneeling, prostrate, standing, sitting, gazing upward), facial expression, which must be restrained*’ (Barthes, 1976, p. 48). In the notes taken by one of the authors while doing the 30 days *Spiritual Exercises*, we can find: ‘*shut the blinds of the room while meditating on the ‘Passion of Christ’; never address or look in the eyes of other exercitants during the retreat; during the third week [meditations on the Passion of Christ], and while having the meals, listen to music that is not joyful, like ‘Mozart’s Requiem’ or ‘Bach’s Passions’; look for discomfort during the third week; the opposite applies during the fourth week [meditations on the ‘Resurrection of Christ’]*’.

These elements are part of the *Exercises*’ attempt to stimulate imagination. Having the correct facial expression while meditating on the ‘Passion of Christ’ prepares the exercitant for imagining what Christ went through during his trial and execution (as an example); yet another example, is the imagination of hell:

‘*The First Prelude* [italics in the original], the composition of place. Here it will be to see in imagination the length, breadth, and depth of hell.

The Second Prelude [italics in the original], to ask for what I desire. Here it will be to ask for an interior sense of the pain suffered by the damned, so that if through my faults I should forget the love of the Eternal Lord, at least the fear of those pains will serve to keep me from falling into sin.

The First Point [italics in the original] will be to see with the eyes of the imagination the huge fires and, so to speak, the souls within the bodies full of fire.

The Second Point [italics in the original]. In my imagination I will hear the wailing, the shrieking, the cries, and the blasphemies against our Lord and all his saints.

The Third Point [italics in the original]. By my sense of smell I will perceive the smoke, the sulphur, the filth, and the rotting things.

The Fourth Point [italics in the original]. By my sense of taste I will experience the bitter flavors of hell: tears, sadness, and the worm of conscience.

The Fifth Point [italics in the original]. By my sense of touch, I will feel how the flames touch the souls and burn them.’ (SE, §65-70)

This quote, taken from the meditation on the *Spiritual Exercises*, is one example of how the Jesuits were inclined towards the image and the penitential act as elements of indoctrination. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, Jesuits would explore these traits of their spirituality using other forms, like predications. Jesuit predications and missions tended towards the ‘spectacular’, exploring the power of the visual and of theatre. Jesuits adopted this strategy across the world. As an example, Paolo Segneri, an Italian priest, became famous for his popular missions. Together with his companion, Juan Pedro Piamonente, Paolo Segneri usually spent one week in one Italian village predicating about the final judgment, the passion of Christ and death. While doing this, his Jesuit companion, Juan Pedro Piamonente, devoted himself to catechesis and confessions. This kind of mission, known as popular mission, typically ended on a Sunday, with a procession and penitential acts. At the end of the procession, Juan Pedro Piamonente would make a sermon on the salvation of the soul and invite people to take the ‘holy communion’. Before leaving the village, Juan Pedro Piamonente and Paolo Segneri distributed devotional images (‘*estampas*’), together with recommendations on simple spiritual exercises they could perform on their own so that the outcomes of the mission could endure. Paolo Segneri is testimony to the introduction of dramatic elements, like as an example flagellation, into the performances inspired by the *Spiritual Exercises*. Some of these performances were rather violent: flagellation inflicting serious wounds to the flesh, transforming repent and the penitential acts into something individuals could literally see. Performing the *Spiritual Exercises* was considered crucial for ‘*moving the soul*’ and work on the emotions that could reveal ‘God’s will’. That is why many suggested that some penitential acts should be performed during the night, accompanied by chants, candles and incense. The theatre and the performances accompanying it were supposed to drive the senses and the emotions. The stimulation of senses was particularly relevant, especially in a context in which it was believed the ‘devil’ could be smelled (Certeau, 2000).

As for the sermons, these focused mainly on death, the final judgment and the passion precisely to trigger emotions and work on the senses. That is also why the sermons would be complemented with visual artefacts (like images): pictorial language, images of hell and people eternally condemned, were used to complement the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The use of visual elements for the contemplation of God's mystery was rather centred on imagining Christ (with imagination being rather visual by itself). For example, the individual was invited to 'see' the 'Passion of Christ'. The senses and emotions were crucial for the *Exercises*, to the extent that all the meditations of the *Exercises* were accompanied by a set of images. Upon the request of Ignatius of Loyola, a volume was prepared with printed scenes of the Gospel ('*Evangelicae historiae imagines*', published in 1593), together with another volume with annotations and meditations to accompany the images ('*Adnotationes et meditationes in Evangelia*', published in 1594). The purpose of the images accompanying the meditations was to turn the invisible visible. Jesuit emblems were not just images: an entire theory of the emblem was developed by prominent Jesuits, like for example Athanasius Kircher [1602–1680]. The images supporting the *Exercises* were not representations *per se*. Instead, they carried within them the mystery of God: '*the effect of fascination may be such that the gaze cannot release itself from the mystery of the image*' (Dekoninck, 2017).

The master of the Exercises

Throughout the seventeenth-century Jesuits truncated the sections of the *Spiritual Exercises* in which finding 'God's will' was emphasised. Nieremberg, a seventeenth-century Jesuit, for example, gave prominence to only three sections of the *Exercises* (Hendrickson, 2013). The reasons for delivering the *Exercises* truncated were manifold. First, the *Exercises*, as a retreat, were not suitable for everyone. The *Exercises* were to be adapted according to the individual's '*age, education, and ability*' (SE, §18). Second, because the *Exercises* allowed each individual to find 'God's will' for themselves, they were often seen as potentially leading to heresy or the diminishing of the mediating role of the Church. More specifically, by putting the individual in a direct relationship with God, the *Exercises* were too close to heretic movements like the *Alumbrados* (see Certeau, 1995; O'Reilly, 2020). Third, the *Exercises*' meditations were inherently complex, and therefore needed the guidance of a master. The published *Directories* (Palmer, 1996) on how to guide the *Exercises* allow us to better understand how, throughout the centuries, the master guided the exercitant without imposing any content into 'God's will'. Indifference plays a crucial role here.

The first directions on how to move towards indifference appear in the text of the *Exercises*: ‘the one giving the Exercises ought not to lean or incline in either direction but rather, while standing by like the pointer of a scale in equilibrium, to allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord’ (SE, §15). In what is known as the ‘Autograph Directory of St. Ignatius’ (Palmer, 1996), indifference is referred to several times as crucial for discerning, through emotions of desolation and consolation, ‘God’s will’. For example, ‘he should examine, when he finds himself in consolation, in which direction God is moving him; similarly in desolation’ (Palmer, 1996, p. 9). Consolation refers to the set of emotions that imply joy, love and hope, whereas desolation refers to emotions like ‘sadness, lack of confidence, lack of love, dryness, and so on’ (Palmer, 1996, p. 9). The role of the master is to help the exercitant interpret the emotions, but not to interpret them or point in any direction, allowing the exercitant to discover ‘things by himself’ (Directory of Juan Alonso de Vitoria, circa 1555; Palmer, 1996, p. 19). In the same directory, the emphasis is put on preserving the order of meditations. Juan Alonso de Vitoria (circa 1555) says that Ignatius himself ‘insisted on this very strongly’ (translated in Palmer, 1996, p. 22) so the exercitant progresses towards finding ‘God’s will’.

How indifference should be meditated was rather simple: ‘He should lay down the foundation in three points: the purpose for which man was made; the functions of creatures; and his own behavior in the use of them’ (Notes of St. Peter Canisius, 1521-1597; translated in Palmer, 1996, p. 41). The formal analysis of indifference in this way was not unique to St. Peter Canisius. Duarte Pereyra (1527-1587), made a similar division advising the master to do the following: ‘the first, on self-knowledge through causes, the second on self-knowledge through effects, and the third on indifference’ to all things (circa 1562; translated by Palmer, 1996, p. 52). Such formal analysis of emotions (tracing their cause, effect and contrasting them with indifferent desire) is also present in Rahner’s 20th century (published in 1971) notes on how to deliver the *Exercises*. In yet another example, Fessard’s study (2010) of the *Exercises* points to a similar way of structuring the indifference principle. Such way of explaining indifference is still widely used in nowadays *Exercises* by the Jesuits directing them.

Indifference is not only the starting point of the *Exercises*. Indifference functions as a way of accommodating the multitude of personal situations for which the individual searches for ‘God’s will’. The practice of the *Exercises* does not, however, produce indifference. Instead, through a mysterious engagement with the Exercises, the individual can become closer to their ultimate end, God, although such end can only be reached upon death (Endean, 2001). The unintelligibility of the practice matches the unintelligibility of God – the practice of the

Exercises is pure ‘proceduralism’ (Quattrone, 2015) without a goal, a meaning, and end rather than God himself. Such mysterious ‘proceduralism’ is concomitant with the multitude of practices that the *Exercises* generated throughout history: truncated versions of the text, sermons, predication, uses of images, retreats guided by a master, as detailed throughout our findings, all allow the original text and the practice to morph into endless multiplicity and indetermination.

Discussion

In Jesuit spirituality, indifference establishes a link between a practice and being truthful to ‘God’s will’. Indifference is not something the individual is, but that the individual will be: indifference is only reached with death (Rahner, 1971). Hence the relevance of the use of things as a means towards God, even though we never fully reach a state of pure indifference towards the worldly. Notwithstanding, a positive relationship (indifferent) with ‘all created things’ (SE, §23) puts the individual closer to God, whereas any alteration of the order of use of things puts the individual away from ‘God’s will’. Such disordering of things is sin (Rahner, 1971; Fessard, 2010). Hence the meditations on hell proposed in the *Exercises*.

The meditations on Hell, just like the other meditations in the *Exercises*, bring indifference back to experience. Everything done in the *Exercises*, like the use of imagination or visual compositions, the gestures, or the use of the senses, put the exercitant in a tension between the imagined concreteness of experience and the displacement of the subject as indifferent, a state they will only reach upon death, when all things lose their use. Such tension is of relevance for our narrative, insofar as it establishes the difference between the individual subject and their multiple possible ways of being. The practicing, *ad infinitum*, of the *Exercises* is revelatory of the immanence of ‘God’s will’ in each individual’s own history (Endean, 2001). It is because ‘God’s will’ cannot be captured for every instance of daily life that the individual is invited to practice the search for indifference on a daily basis: examinations of conscience, meditations, use of imagery for triggering reflection are all examples of how the text of the *Exercises* points towards an endless multiplicity and indetermination, revelatory of God’s mystery, which does not mean that the mystery of God is revealed. It rather means that the mystery of God is understood as such.

However, the most relevant question surrounding the practicing of the *Exercises* remains unanswered: how do the Jesuits understand what they have to do if the book does not prescribe everything? Our case shows that mystery underpins the practicing of the *Exercises* throughout

the centuries. The book of the *Exercises*, the spirituality works that surrounded its diffusion and the imagery developed to prompt imagination, all embody the mystery surrounding ‘God’s will’, rather than the presence of ‘God’s will’. The *Exercises*, and the material elements that accompany them, never show something that is graspable. Instead, they present the mystery. In the case of the *Exercises*, mystery is about the manifestation of ‘God’s will’ to each individual that practices the book. The new logics of religion that the Jesuits diffused is not about what is revealed, but about what is mysteriously communicated by God to each individual.

In that sense, the *Exercises*, understood as both a book and a practice, do not make the logics of religion visible. Therefore, the *Exercises* were diffused not because of the mobility of book-as-practice, but because of the malleability of the construction of meanings it allows. By diffusing a logic of religion which is defined in terms of the mystery (surrounding ‘God’s will’), practicing the *Exercises* generates mystery, instead of generating stability of meanings. We expand below.

The starting point of our theoretical framing of this paper is that extant literature of practice theory and institutionalism takes meaning for granted: both practices and institutions are imbued with meaning. This, we claim, leaves out the possibility that the absence of meaning might be as much a driver for action and order as a substantiated understanding of meaning, if not even more. Religion, understood as a regime of practices which assemble the unknown, the mysterious, the invisible and the silent, is the perfect setting for researching the possibility of order without meaning necessarily underpinning what actors do. Our paper has shown that in the case of the *Exercises*, neither human nor non-human actors have their action driven by any substantiated form of meaning. It is mystery (in our case, the search for the mysterious ‘will of God’) what drives action and orders the configurations of practices and material artefacts/objects which constitutes the ‘entified’ practiced of the *Exercises* and the institutionalized modern practice of ‘going into a retreat’.

Our study’s contribution to practice-driven institutionalism is twofold. First, we show that practices can abridge the micro and the macro without necessarily substantiating or representing any taken for granted meaning. Second, we bring to the fore the role of mystery, which encompasses elements of social life largely overlooked in the literature which attempts the establishment of some link between the macro and the micro. Our study therefore highlights the relevance of openness, situatedness, embeddedness, incompleteness, ambiguity, paradox, silence, serendipity and emotions for furthering our understanding of the mutual constitution of practices and institutions. It shows how institutional life is both without and full of meaning.

It is without meaning as there is no overarching structure and set of beliefs and social norms which are written in stone, ready to be 'isomorphically' adopted or decoupled. It is full of meanings, as the power of institutions rests on their ability of attracting a potentially infinite multitude of selves, with their histories, own sets of beliefs and understandings. It is in the interplay between the mysterious nature of institutions and their reliance on practices, which make us all relate to this ineffable unknowable (without making us either succumb or overthrow the social norms that such institutions ignite), that a practice-driven institutionalism makes sense. A sense which can only make sense if one considers mystery (and not knowing) as the cornerstone of institutional life and death.

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